

Chapter Three

Natalie turned into the driveway of the beach house and parked the car. We sat and stared. It was amazing. The house was located on top of a dune that ran down to the beach.

Uncle Clive had arranged for me to house-sit and I finally understood why he'd looked so pleased with himself. When I'd received the offer from the school, we'd all gone out to dinner to celebrate. Dad and I had been calculating on the back of a paper napkin what I could afford to pay in rent on a first year teacher's salary. That's when Uncle Clive had told us about the house.

It belonged to one of his clients who had relocated to another part of the country for an indefinite period. They'd wanted someone to house-sit rather than letting it on the holiday rental market. It was fully furnished and fitted out.

"Come on, let's go take a look!" Natalie almost dragged me to the front door. She seemed determined not to have any more conversations about angels.

Natalie didn't do weird very well.

I found the keys in my handbag. My parents should have been standing there with me. The thought was a blow. It had all sounded so perfect. Too perfect. I managed to steady the key and get the door open. Natalie gave me a small shove, impatient to see the inside.

The house was open plan with huge windows overlooking the beach. A large bank of glass doors opened onto a covered outdoor deck and dark timber floorboards ran throughout the house. The long kitchen had an island bar with cane stools, matching the furniture in the dining area. The sofa was black leather with bright red cushions.

The view to the beach and sea through the windows and glass doors was incredible, not a bad view from any direction.

I walked down the short hall and found the bedrooms and bathroom. The main bedroom was spacious, with a compact ensuite bathroom. French doors opened onto the deck.

A large framed photo on the wall opposite the bed made me walk over for a closer look. Sunbeams streamed out of an ominous grey cloudbank, turning the top of the cloud to shades of yellow and gold. It

made me want to wait, to watch the sun emerge from the darkness of the clouds.

I leaned in to take a better look at the signature on the bottom right hand corner and saw it was not a signature at all but an embossed symbol, a gold disc held within a distinctive archer's bow. I studied it closer. There was something oddly familiar about it, as if I had seen it before, though I could not think where.

"Wow," Natalie breathed behind me, making me jump. "How good is this?" she demanded and I followed her back to the living area.

The sound of the waves was loud, even with the doors closed, a constant whooshing as the water rushed up the sand and then sucked back to the sea.

"Mum... Mum would have loved..." I let the words trail off. My Mum had loved the coast. I remembered the wistful look on her face when I had shown her the job offer letter.

As a child, we had always gone to the beach for holidays, different locations but always the beach. There had only been one year my parents broke their tradition, the year after I nearly drowned. I had been seven years old. My Dad had taken his eyes off me for a few seconds though he'd still had my hand in his when a freak wave had wrested me from his grip. I

remembered being rolled over and over beneath the water before the current dragged me out to sea.

I frowned, wondering where that memory came from. I had not thought of it for years. Anger flashed through me. I couldn't remember the most crucial thing that had happened in my life, just three weeks earlier, but I could clearly recall something that had happened fourteen years ago?

"Come on," Natalie said dragging me out of my thoughts. "Let's go have a look outside." She released the locks on the doors and went out onto the deck. There were a number of low timber sun loungers with thick cushions, inviting lazy afternoon naps. Garden rockeries gave way to lawn that ran to the edge of the dune.

We found a path that led to the beach, and leaving our shoes behind, we walked down to the water's edge. I turned to look back. The garden held four large pandanus palms, their twisted branches, and thick tufts of leaves, offering the house some protection from the constant south easterly.

"That's your home. Can you believe it, Tessa?" Natalie's voice was laden with excitement. "It's unbelievable!"

Natalie's enthusiasm made me realise again how wonderfully perfect it all was. I didn't feel like I deserved anything like perfect, though. I felt guilty. I should have gone home to Brisbane, to the house filled with memories of my parents. There I could have wallowed in my grief. Here I would only have the memories inside me, and in time, new memories that would never include them. The thought terrified me. Never, I vowed. I would tell them everything, share every moment with them. Somehow, they would know! My eyes ached with tears.

"There's a special surprise for you, Tessa," Natalie suddenly said as if she had been struggling to contain it for too long. Then, seeing me wipe the tears off my cheeks, she looked upset. "Oh, Tessa! I wish I hadn't said anything! But, well, I guess you're going to find out sooner than later."

"What are you talking about?" I watched the struggle on her face as she tried to find the words.

"How 'bout I show you?" and I followed her back to the house.

Instead of going inside, she walked around to the garage. "Got your keys?" she asked and I pulled them out of my pocket. Natalie found the right key and turned the lock, pushing the roller door upwards.

Inside the double garage was a shiny red Mini Coupe, an old lawn mower and a variety of tools leaning neatly against the side wall. I looked at her, not understanding.

“The Mini,” Natalie prompted. “It’s your Christmas present from your Mum and Dad. I knew about it because your Dad rang and asked me what colour to get and I said red, of course, the only colour any respectable girl would want to drive.”

I stared at her.

“Remember the day you were heading off to drive down here? You had that problem with your brakes on your old VW, and your Dad took it to the mechanics for you?”

I remembered that day. I would never, ever, forget that day. I barely managed a nod.

“Well, when your Dad found out how bad the brakes were, and a long list of other stuff from the mechanic, that’s when he decided to buy you a new car. He traded your VW, and to keep it a total surprise, Uncle Clive was going to pick up the Mini and drive it down on Christmas morning. Uncle Clive brought it down last week when I came to visit you and I took him home,” Natalie babbled on unable to stop despite the anguish that froze me to the spot.

My blood started pounding, roaring in my ears. I turned and ran, finding the path to the beach.

“Tessa!” Natalie called, coming after me, but I did not slow down. I needed to escape, needed desperately to be alone. I ran, no idea where I was running to, just running, my bare feet scrunching in the wet sand.

An outcrop, jutting out into the sea with the waves crashing against the dark rock eventually stopped me. I scrambled up the boulders, cutting my feet on jagged edges and barnacles but the stinging pain only lasted a few seconds.

Exhausted, I sat on a weathered slab, staring out at the choppy waves. The sun was still fighting its way through the last of the cloud. I pulled my father’s shirt closer, thinking it was the wind making me shiver, but I was cold inside.

They had bought me a car! A gift they probably could not afford, no doubt dipping into their hard-earned savings to buy it. Anger raced through me. Anger at my Dad for thinking my old VW bomb wasn’t good enough, anger at my Mum for not stopping him because he wouldn’t have done it without her knowing. I was angry with myself for not keeping my old car

serviced properly. If I had, my Dad would not have been so impulsive.

If he'd just got the brakes fixed on the VW like he was going to, I would have driven myself to the coast and they'd be at home, planning their trip to teach kids in third world countries when they took early retirement in a few years.

I would have gladly driven my old VW bomb for the rest of my life to change things back to the way they were.

The anger disappeared as fast as it came. The void it left was worse.

As an only child, my adoring parents had loved me with such abundance. They had given my life structure and meaning. They had protected and cherished me. My Mum had been my best friend. My Dad, my mentor.

They were gone.

I lay my forehead on my knees, wrapping my arms around my legs. I cried for them, their lives so abruptly halted before all the good, wonderful things they planned to do. I cried for my loss of them, for myself, and the aching empty hole in me.

When there were no more tears, I raised my face to the sun that had finally broken through the clouds, letting its warmth envelope me, and dry my cheeks.

Natalie gave me plenty of space. She was happy to go into town on her own, for groceries or anything else we needed. I did not pay much attention. I just concentrated on shutting the world out, discovering the absolute depths of being miserable. I hadn't thought it could get any worse until Uncle Clive pressed me to make a date to scatter my parents' ashes. He thought it would help my grief, to say a final goodbye.

The prospect terrified me.

The rocky outcrop became my bolthole. Whenever I needed to be alone, which was most of the time, I would head out to the rocks and sit for hours in solitude, just watching the waves. I never bothered exploring any other part of the beach. I liked it right there.

In my daily pilgrimage, I learnt the rhythm of the beach. The tides, the wind, and others seeking solitude, like me. There was an old fisherman who sat on a partially exposed boulder in the sand, near the half-tide mark. He always wore an old olive anorak, his

long wispy white hair tied back with a leather thong. He looked a little eccentric.

Whenever I passed, he would break his gaze out to sea and look at me. We never spoke. There was no need. Strangely, I always felt reassured when he was there, I couldn't say why. Maybe it was just the familiarity of my new routine.

The weather had turned blustery and the tide nearing its full peak made the rocky outcrop treacherously slippery but I could not stay away, despite Natalie's vain attempts to take me with her to see a movie. I preferred the age-old rhythm of the waves battering against the rocks.

The spray off a large wave showered me and I dried my face on the sleeve of my shirt. The sea looked particularly restless, as if in tune with my mood, the waves curling and rushing towards the rocks then crashing and spraying sea foam high into the air.

I wrapped my arms around my legs, resting my chin on my knees, watching and counting the waves, a martyr to my solitude.

But I was not alone.

Out to sea, a surfer sat on his board, bobbing with the rise and fall of the waves. He was too far away to make out his features but I could see he wore bright

orange shorts. Occasionally, he paddled the water as if to stay angled in my direction. I thought he was watching me, too.

From my vantage, I saw the sea dip away and start to swell way out behind him. He glanced back as if sensing the birth of the wave. In an instant, he turned the board, paddling strongly before neatly angling back towards the beach. He glanced repeatedly over his shoulder, timing the wave as it surged towards him.

In a single lithe motion he raised himself into a crouch, his feet in a steady stance on the board. Then, as the water lifted under him, he straightened, keeping his knees a little bent and raising his arms for balance, letting the power of the wave propel him, taking him with it on its race to the shore.

I held my breath, awed by the motion of both man and water. It lasted barely more than a minute, the wave no sooner made than crashing over itself, breaking against the rocks where I sat, drenching me in spray.

By the time I cleared my vision, the surfer was paddling with long, strong strokes back to the calm beyond the swell to resume his wait, turning his board just a little as if deliberately putting me back in his line of sight.

I gave my thoughts over to him, happy with his company.

I counted the wave pattern, trying to anticipate the next large one. The tenth, and sometimes twelfth, he deemed worthy to ride, the smaller sets he just rose and dipped with the sea.

When the larger waves came, he rode them with confidence, anticipating which way to turn, to the south away from where I watched or to the north towards me and the rocky outcrop. He seemed to know exactly when the wave would break above the curl he was racing along and smoothly angled his board back and forth, taking every ounce of energy it had to give.

There was something exhilarating about watching him and I found myself holding my breath as the waves grew larger, some dwarfing him. One particular wave was larger again. Way out to sea the swell started. He seemed to know, paddling with long, strong strokes to meet it, turning his board shoreward at the last instant, in the perfect spot to use the force of the wave to project him up and into the arc of water.

He shot along it, riding the face of the wall, then turned racing back the way he had come, traversing the length of the water as it defied gravity. He turned

again just as the wave started to curl on itself; coming back towards me and the rocks.

I jumped up, watching for him as he disappeared behind the curtain of water. He reappeared briefly before the wave claimed him again. The ride seemed to last forever. I felt as if I was with him on the board, flashing along the blue water in perfect harmony, my heart racing with excitement.

Then the curl started to crash over itself, just off the outcrop where I stood. The force of hitting the rocks ricocheted along its length and the wave collapsed into a mess of white churning water.

My clothes were stuck to me, saturated from the water sprayed into the air. My hair was a sodden mess, too. I quickly wiped the water out of my eyes, looking for him in the aftermath.

There was no sign of him.

Adrenaline made my heart pump and the sound of my blood filled my ears as I scrambled along the rocks to the point jutting out into the sea. It was treacherously slippery. Had he been swept onto the rocks? Crouching carefully, I leaned forward to look into the churning water. Nothing.

I backed away from the edge, wary that the next wave could sweep me off, and scanned the sea on

both sides of the outcrop before looking back towards the beach.

Except for the old fisherman, who seemed indifferent to the waves rushing around his rock, it was deserted. Then, I spotted a surfboard drifting in the shallow water. There was no sign of its rider. Was it his? I couldn't see any other surfers out on the water.

Panic speared through me as I thought of him caught under the weight of the wave, being rolled over and over, losing perspective of the sea bottom and the sky, the current taking him, the burning need to breathe.... The sharp memories from my childhood rushed at me.

What should I do? Enlist the help of the fisherman? I hadn't brought my cell phone. Should I run home and call the police? I hesitated, calculating the time it would take to do that. Would I be too late?

Then, just as I was about to scramble down the rocks, I heard laughter, deep masculine, carefree laughter. I thought I imagined it until I heard it again. I hunted the sound.

Out beyond where the waves were forming, I saw him, the bright orange board shorts a beacon as the swell raised him up. He was floating on his back, arms and legs spread wide, rafting his body, letting the sea

take him where it would. Then, from the top of a swell, he dived beneath the water in a graceful motion. He surfaced moments later, kicking free, as if he had launched himself off the seabed.

Relief washed over me.

I envied him his freedom, his fearlessness, and his joy as another burst of laughter echoed across the sea. Sympathetic laughter rose in my throat. It filled my mouth, bursting through my lips to find its own voice.

The sound startled me and I bit it off as guilt swamped me.

‘They’re dead.’ The thought was like acid drenching my brain and I dropped my eyes to the slick, cold rock I stood on, my brief moment of happiness defeated by the weight of my sadness.

‘And, you’re alive,’ sounded in my head. A strong compulsion to say it, acknowledge it, took hold of me.

“I’m alive,” I whispered.

‘Shout it out!’

I balled my hands, raising my head, suddenly defiant of the sadness that had broken me.

“I’m alive,” I shouted to the blue sky.

A wave crashed onto the rocks, dumping water over me. It rapidly drained away, tugging around my

feet as it rushed back to the sea. I bent my knees, pushing down with my heels to hold my place.

The cold water shocked me, made me angry. “Is that the best you can do?” I challenged, and the strength in my voice surprised me.

For a moment, the wind dropped and the wave motion lulled. It felt like the world fell silent.

“I’m alive,” I murmured as my anger drained away.

I looked around. The old fisherman was watching me. Perhaps the wind had carried my words. I nodded to him and very gravely, he inclined his head back.

I looked for the surfer. He was bobbing on the sea, the afternoon sun sparkling brightly on the water around him. He was looking straight at me.

I wondered if he had heard my words, too.